



# LESSONS in LEADERSHIP: Setting expectations

BY PHIL HANSEN

Leadership demands effective interaction with our fellow man. That can be a tall order when the people we're tasked with leading are complex and unique in so many ways. Cultural and generational differences among our personnel are further defined by differing levels of education, training and life experience. Add the dynamics of peer influence, competition and organizational culture to the mix, and we can face some real challenges in finding ways to reach out and motivate such diverse personnel toward common objectives.

There are no magic bullets for successful leadership, but there are several leadership fundamentals to draw from. During this series of articles, we've discussed several of those fundamentals, such as adherence to core values, the power of listening to your people and communicating effectively, the need to accept risk and responsibility for your actions, empowering others to make decisions, and always appreciating the obligation we owe to those we lead. In this article, I'd like to discuss a facet of leadership that sounds so simple, it's often overlooked or taken for granted. I'm talking about the need to set clear expectations.

## LOOKING PEOPLE IN THE EYE

There's an old axiom that says people will live up to, or down to, the expectations you place upon them. I believe there's a lot of truth to that

notion. Unfortunately, too many supervisors and managers shy away from the responsibility of directly engaging their personnel and stating clear expectations for performance. Rather, they default to reams of policy statements, memorandums and emails as a means of conveying standards of conduct.

We live and work in an era that seems to favor expedience and cost-effectiveness, while minimizing personal involvement and emotive investment in supervision. That's one of the reasons we have many managers but very few leaders. Agencies attempt to legislate the behavior of their personnel with policy and memorandums rather than influence behavior through hands-on training, mutual understanding and the personal statement of clear expectations. After all, it costs very little and is easy to write and publish policy, compared to the cost of substantive training or the courage and emotional investment that's required to look people in the eye, explain what's important and demand some level of performance.

Like many departments these days, my agency is somewhat short of personnel, and like all agencies, we have a policy that prohibits calling in sick if you're not really ill. Our Patrol Bureau often operates at, or marginally above, minimum staffing levels. The personnel shortages are exacerbated during holidays and peak vacation periods when personnel put in for well-deserved time off. In recent years, I've heard repeat-

ed complaints from supervisors and managers about inordinate numbers of people calling in sick on holidays. Obviously, when the sick call-ins put our staffing below minimums, we're forced to call people in from home or hold personnel over to work a double shift.

When the topic of sick call-ins was discussed among supervisors and managers, there were often comments made about "this generation's" lack of work ethic, or their tendency to prioritize personal time at holidays over their obligation to work. Interestingly enough, the proposed solutions began to center on our honoring fewer holiday time-off requests, so there would be a larger pool of working employees. In other words, we began to consider denying legitimate holiday time-off requests from tenured employees in order to make up for the inevitable call-ins from others who weren't really sick. It made no sense.

Last Dec. 23, I attended a couple of patrol briefings and when the sergeants had concluded with the day's briefing material, I took a minute to talk with the troops before they went out into the field. I started by asking how many of them were scheduled to work during the Christmas holiday. As expected, most raised their hands. I then thanked them in advance for doing the right thing and working their shifts. I told them that in my day, I would have come to work on my death bed rather than call in sick on a holiday, because

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I wouldn't want that kind of reputation, and I certainly wouldn't want to harm another deputy who had already worked their shift and now had to be held over. I didn't talk about policy violations, make threats or try to bully them, but I did make my expectations clear. I ended by sincerely thanking them for the great work they do, asked them to look out for one another, and wished them all a Merry Christmas.

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## AMONG HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS, PEERS ALSO SET EXPECTATIONS AND HOLD ONE ANOTHER TO STANDARDS OF PERFORMANCE.

At our next staff meeting, I was pleased but not particularly shocked to learn that we had no sick call-ins over the Christmas or New Year's holidays. It seems that my talk at briefing became a widely discussed topic on all the shifts. Now believe me, I'm not naïve enough to think that my simple talk at two briefings was enough to address this problem over time; but it was a beginning. I think that many of these young officers saw other officers calling in, and just assumed it was acceptable behavior. I also believe that going forward, if more managers, supervisors and training officers begin to vocalize our expectations, they will instill themselves at the peer level and we can radically change and perhaps even eliminate the practice of bogus sick call-ins on holidays. Among high-performing teams, peers also set expectations and hold one another to standards of performance.

## POLICY WITHOUT EXPECTATIONS IS FRUITLESS

We are all inundated with law and policy, and the truth be told, most of us pay less attention to some rules than we do to others. Like driving over the speed limit or slow-rolling through a stop sign, we tend to minimize or ignore aspects of law or policy if it has become the cultural norm to do so, or if we're not made aware that our actions are wrong or potentially harmful to others.

Whenever new officers are hired in my department, I meet with them and spend time expressing my expectations for their conduct as Santa Maria police officers. I'm particularly specific in articulating my demands that we treat each other with dignity, and that the same level of respect extends to the members of our community. During these conversations, we also spend some time discussing my view of constitutional policing, which in basic terms says that we derive our authority from the very people we police, and that in our system of government, community support is essential to our success. As law enforcement personnel we are outnumbered in most communities by a thousand to one, and it's the members of the community who empower us to do our work.

These meetings with my new personnel are more than just an introduction. They're the first steps in the critical leadership task of developing trust and a relationship with the young people I'm responsible for. I cherish those relationships, and in many ways they are foundational to my sense of leadership. The meetings also are an opportunity for me to express my most basic

expectations for their performance, and to explain why those expectations are important. In response, they make me proud on a daily basis. All generations are different and the current generation of law enforcement personnel is certainly different than mine. In some ways they are exponentially better, so I try not to sell them short. Sometimes, in striving to overcome differences and achieve common goals with our subordinates, all we have to do is look them in the eye, explain the importance of their actions, and let them know what we expect of them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Hansen is chief of police for the Santa Maria (CA) Police Department. Prior to his service in Santa Maria, he retired as a captain from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department with 36 years of service. Most of his work was in the field of tactical operations and critical incident command, including 13 years as a full-time SWAT sergeant/team leader and six years as the SWAT lieutenant/team commander for SEB. He was an elected member of the NTOA Board of Directors for 20 years and was chairman of the board from 2008 to 2013; he now serves as a director emeritus.

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